

# Chakachak

## Environmental Awareness Through a Kids' Film

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

**A** garbage dump was the inspiration for Sai Paranjpye's latest movie. Her muse: children as effective agents of change. Her driving force: a belief in film as a potent medium for persuasion.

The result: *Chakachak*, or *Squeaky Clean*, a comedy, adventure, children's fable, documentary and family feature film rolled together and topped off with some pretty exciting fight sequences.

Filmed in Pune, but set in Mumbai, the nearly two-and-a-half-hour film tells the story of eight children who find their favorite playground turning into a dump and decide to clean up their whole neighborhood, gradually persuading the apathetic adults to join the campaign.

In real life, the film has had just that effect since it premiered in Pune in November 2004 and was screened in commercial cinemas in Mumbai. Schools and social organizations brought children to see it and *Chakachak Toli*, or "Clean-up Clubs," have sprung up in Pune. Children laugh all the way through the movie and remember what they have learned. Schools now play a role in helping the local government initiatives in energy efficiency, and management of solid waste and water resources.

Paranjpye weaves in a criminal plot, kidnappings, escapes, heroics, the bonds of friendship and the drama of relationships. She uses catchy songs, animation sequences, documentary footage, hilarious portrayals of bad guys, and the fresh, unselfconscious acting of the children.



"I've been trying not to do it for the past 10 years. Then I just thought I've got to do it. Just go out on the road and look around," Paranjpye says. As a creative person she would prefer not to deal with the distribution and promotion but just finish shooting and move to the next film. "But I can't go on to my next film because I've got to nurse this one," she says.

Paranjpye is making no profit on *Chakachak*. Without even a Web site, her small film company has been handing out posters and information packets, getting exciting response in Mumbai, where two cinema houses took bookings from schools. "It was a shoestring effort and everything went into the film so there is no money for publicity," she said in June, on her way home from meeting with a teachers' group. She is also talking to several distributors to get the film a wider audience in Maharashtra and elsewhere.

"Film is a potent medium, with a boundless power to reach out, impress and win over," says Paranjpye. "Young minds are quick to imbibe. Given proper guidance, they will embrace the principles of model citizenship in no time and learn to care for their surroundings."

"Indians are very fastidious about personal hygiene. Their concern does not, alas, stretch beyond their houses at the most," Paranjpye said in the promotional material she prepared to gather

*Sai Paranjpye in New Delhi seeking distributors for her film, Chakachak, in which children from all walks of life take the lead in cleaning up their environment.*



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Courtesy Sai Paranjpye Films

funding for the film. The money trickled in over two years from about 10 organizations, such as the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board, ICICI Bank and the Pune Municipal Corporation. The U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership (USAEP), a project of USAID, assisted Paranjpye in getting a bridge grant for some of the songs and provided technical and other advice. “*Chakachak* is a mix of entertainment and education with a message that tries to raise awareness about urban squalor and cleanliness in cities,” says Kristen Easter, USAEP’s country manager in India. The Pune authorities and schools made it easy for Paranjpye to film. “I’ve never had it so good vis-à-vis access,” says Paranjpye, “because everybody is so sick of dirty streets, overflowing garbage dumps and the damage to the environment.”

“Children are the best agents of change,” she says. “They are pure. If kids start going up and saying, ‘Hey Pal, don’t spit on our road,’ it’s awesome.”

As a child, Paranjpye says, she read books such as those by Enid Blyton where “kids get together and do things.” Her film is reminiscent of the old “Our Gang” movie series in the United States, about young children getting into adventures as they solve their own problems. Paranjpye has never seen an “Our Gang” movie but the motif is clearly universal. “It’s very appealing for children to make a group rather than do something in solitude,” she says.

The child actors—only one a professional—also learned their environmental lessons. “They said, ‘Now you know, Auntie, we can’t mess around because people will see what we have said in the film,’” she recalls.

Paranjpye’s daughter, Ashwini Abhyankar, also appeared in the film and accompanied her mother to a New Delhi screening, aimed at generating interest for distribution of the film in the capital’s schools.

Abhyankar talked about what the film meant in a personal way: “When you are stopped at a red signal and there is a man in a car next to you, you just wait, and you know he will stick his head out and spit.” Everyone finds it disgusting, Abhyankar notes, but few speak up. “We are very shy. We feel, ‘It doesn’t concern me.’ Sometimes, every third step there is something under your foot. This is Mother Earth. If young people ask someone, ‘Why are you spitting on your mother?’ he will look sheepish. If five people ask, maybe he will change.”

The children portrayed in the film are from all walks of life, from a ragpicker to a rich kid, a Bengali to a Tamilian and from different religions. “It had to be that way; it’s all of us,” says Paranjpye, although she feels, “This is more a city film for this population which is flowing into the cities. I wonder if in the city people lose their individuality to a certain extent and take it out on the city, feeling that, ‘It’s not really our place.’”

There is a “vicious spiral that comes from deprivation, and leads to a generation not able to have a societal feeling,” she says. But simply living in a clean environment, with some beauty around can “lead to an overall feeling of betterment and a snowballing effect that translates into a more prosperous, healthy society,” she feels.

“I have no illusion that one movie is going to change India overnight,” Paranjpye says, “but a drop in the ocean, why not?” □